

The Book of Revelation and 'Apocalypse'

1. Introduction

Revelation 1:1 states: 'The revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place'.

There are two 'apocalypses' in the biblical canon: Daniel (chapters 7-12) and Revelation. Other 'apocalyptic' texts can be found in Joel, Isa. 24-27, Zech. 9-14, and Mark 13. Other Jewish and Christian apocalypses (not found in the Jewish or Christian Bible) include: I-III Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Ascension of Isaiah.

2. What is an Apocalypse? The literal meaning of the word *apokalypsis* is 'that which is uncovered or revealed'. It is certainly a symbolic writing unveiling divine truths.

Many seek to define an 'apocalypse' by listing its characteristics: use of mythology, secret numbers, visions, startling images and symbols, OT influence. However, any definition of what constitutes an 'apocalypse' must pay particular attention to its **form**, **content** and **function**.

3. The Form, Content and Function of an Apocalypse

Form An apocalypse is a prose narrative in autobiographical form. Divine revelation comes to a human seer through a heavenly mediator (Christ or angel) in the form of a series of visions or dreams (cf. Rev. 4:1-22:5).

The first vision actually occurs in Rev. 1:9, and the seven letters are enclosed within a revelation communicated by the heavenly Christ to John the seer on the island of Patmos. John also travels to the heavenly regions (4:1).

Content The visions contains mysteries/truths about God and the heavenly world. There are two kinds of visions in an apocalypse:

i) Visions whose perspective can be described in terms of **time (horizontal line)**, in that heavenly realities will soon break through on earth to bring about the End (eschatology). 'For the time is near' (Rev. 22:10). God will bring about the End of the earthly world in its

present form and will carry out judgement and salvation. This involves transformation into a new heaven and new earth (21:1); the resurrection of the dead (20:4-6, 13); the afterlife (6:9-11; 7:13-17).

ii) Visions whose perspective can be described in terms of **space (vertical line)** and focus on the close link between the earthly and heavenly worlds.

A detailed description is given of the heavenly world: the divine throne (Rev. 4); the heavenly Jerusalem (21:9-21); the exalted Christ (1:12-16; 5:6; 19:11-16), Michael (12:7), and Satan (12:3-17; 16:13; 20:1-3, 7-10).

Function An apocalypse offers a message of consolation during a period of crisis. The emphasis is upon the divine origin of the message and on the fact that God reigns over all. John receives a vision of the heavenly world in order to gain an insight into the earthly world and its fate. His readers are challenged to assess their present situation from a completely new perspective. They are to recognize that God is at work in earthly events and figures.

The true nature of Rome is disclosed (e.g., the goddess Roma is depicted as a harlot in 17:2, 15-16). God's kingship and Christ's victory are revealed (Rev. 4-5).

Revelation thus offers reassurance and hope in a world where Rome seems to be in total control. God himself is the enthroned king; he will end the present oppression, destroy the beast and the dragon, and establish a new heaven and a new earth.

The readers of these visions are therefore called upon to change their outlook and to repent. Visions of the truth and purity of the life above (central visions) challenge the churches to turn away from idolatry and immorality (2:14, 20).

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